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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the impact of a program called "New Friends: Mainstreaming Activities To Help Young Children Understand and Accept Individual Differences" in teaching preschool children about similarities, differences, and disabilities, and assessed its effectiveness in improving nondisabled children's attitudes toward, and interactions with, children with disabilities. A treatment group and a control group were assessed before and after the New Friends intervention program. A cognitive measure, an affective measure, and an observational coding scheme were used. The New Friends program, which uses life-sized dolls with disabilities to introduce important concepts about specific disabling conditions, was conducted three times a week for a 3-week period. The four units presented included an introductory unit on differences and similarities, and units on hearing impairments, and physical and learning impairments. Results indicated that exposure to the New Friends program led to positive changes in attitudes and to increased knowledge of disabilities. However, no behavioral changes in social interaction patterns were observed. It is concluded that New Friends appears to provide a useful curriculum for use in conjunction with other procedures designed to enhance the acceptance of children with disabilities by their non-disabled peers. (GLR)

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Changing Preschoolers' Attitudes
Toward Children With Disabilities^{1 2}

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Abstract

This study investigated the impact of the New Friends curriculum in teaching preschool children about similarities/differences and disabilities and assessed its effectiveness in improving children's attitudes toward and interactions with children with disabilities. Two groups (treatment and control) were assessed before and after the New Friends intervention program. Exposure to New Friends led to positive changes in attitudes and to increased knowledge of disabilities; however, no behavioral changes in actual social interaction patterns were observed. New Friends provides a useful curriculum for use in conjunction with other procedures designed to enhance the acceptance of children with disabilities.

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Whereas PL 94-142, and more recently PL 99-457, have had an enormous impact on educating children with disabilities along side their non-disabled peers in mainstreamed settings, current research indicates we still have a great deal to learn in promoting positive attitudes toward children with disabilities (Gresham, 1986; Siperstein & Bak, 1986)

One program designed specifically to promote greater acceptance of children with disabilities is "New Friends: Mainstreaming Activities To Help Young Children Understand and Accept Individual Differences" (Chapel Hill Training-Outreach Project, 1983). New Friends uses life-size dolls with disabilities to introduce important concepts about specific disabilities. Previous attempts to improve older children's attitudes through the use of puppets (i.e., "The Kids on the Block") have met with mixed success (Aiello, 1988; Rosenbaum, Armstrong & King, 1986). The present study evaluated the effectiveness of the New Friends program as an agent of change in children's social interaction preferences and attitudes as well as in facilitating an understanding of handicapping conditions.

Method

Subjects

Sixteen children without disabilities, ranging in age from 46 to 66 months, enrolled in a preschool program were used.

Materials

Change was assessed using three measures: (1) a cognitive measure assessed children's knowledge of various disabilities,

individual differences, and similarities; (2) an affective measure assessed children's attitudes toward various disabilities; and (3) an observational coding scheme which determined frequency and nature of each student's contact with a mainstreamed student in the class.

Procedure

From the original 16 students, half were randomly selected to participate in the New Friends program and half received an alternative unrelated experience. All children were assessed both prior to and after the New Friends program using the three measures described above. For the Affective Measure, students were shown sets of pictures which portrayed same-age peers who were either (a) non-disabled (b) in a wheelchair (c) wearing a body hearing aid or (d) who actually had Down Syndrome. While viewing the pictures, students were asked questions about who they would invite to a birthday party and who they would invite home to play after school. Two pretest and two posttest observational sessions were conducted by two observers who coded a variety of physical and verbal interactions.

The New Friends program was conducted three times a week (25 minutes a session) for a period of three weeks. Four units were presented: introductory unit on differences/similarities; hearing impairment, physical impairment (cerebral palsy), learning impairment (mental retardation).

Results

Cognitive Measure

The mean correct responses for the Cognitive category are presented in Figure 1.

 Insert Figure 1 about here

Compared to the control, the New Friends children showed greater cognitive gains for general information on differences/similarities [$F(1,26)=22.0, p<.001$], hearing impairment [$F(1,28)=27.3, p<.001$], and physical impairment [$F(1,28)=31.4, p<.001$]. The increase in the learning impairment category was not significant.

Affective Measure

Mean affective ratings are presented in Figure 2.

 Insert Figure 2 about here

Compared to the control, New Friends children showed more positive attitudes in the hearing impairment category on the Birthday Question [$F(1,27)=5.29, p<.05$] and the Play Question [$F(1,27)=5.78, p<.05$]. The changes on both questions in the physical impairment category were not significant. For the learning impairment category, New Friends children showed more positive attitudes on the Play Question [$F(1,14)=8.22, p<.05$].

Behavior Interactions

There were no significant changes between pre and post

testing.

Discussion

Overall, these results indicate that the New Friends program does hold promise for teaching preschool children about differences/similarities and disabilities. Further, the program produced some positive attitudinal changes as well. It may be possible to enhance these changes with a more intensive program. That the program did not produce behavior changes is not surprising. Previous research has indicated that a variety of more intensive efforts (e.g., cooperative learning, teaching children with disabilities to recruit natural communities of reinforcement, using peer initiation strategies (Ballard, Coreman, Gottlieb, & Kaufman, 1977; Gresham, 1986) may be required to produce significant behavioral change. None-the-less, New Friends does appear to provide a useful curriculum for use in conjunction with other procedures designed to enhance the acceptance of children with disabilities.

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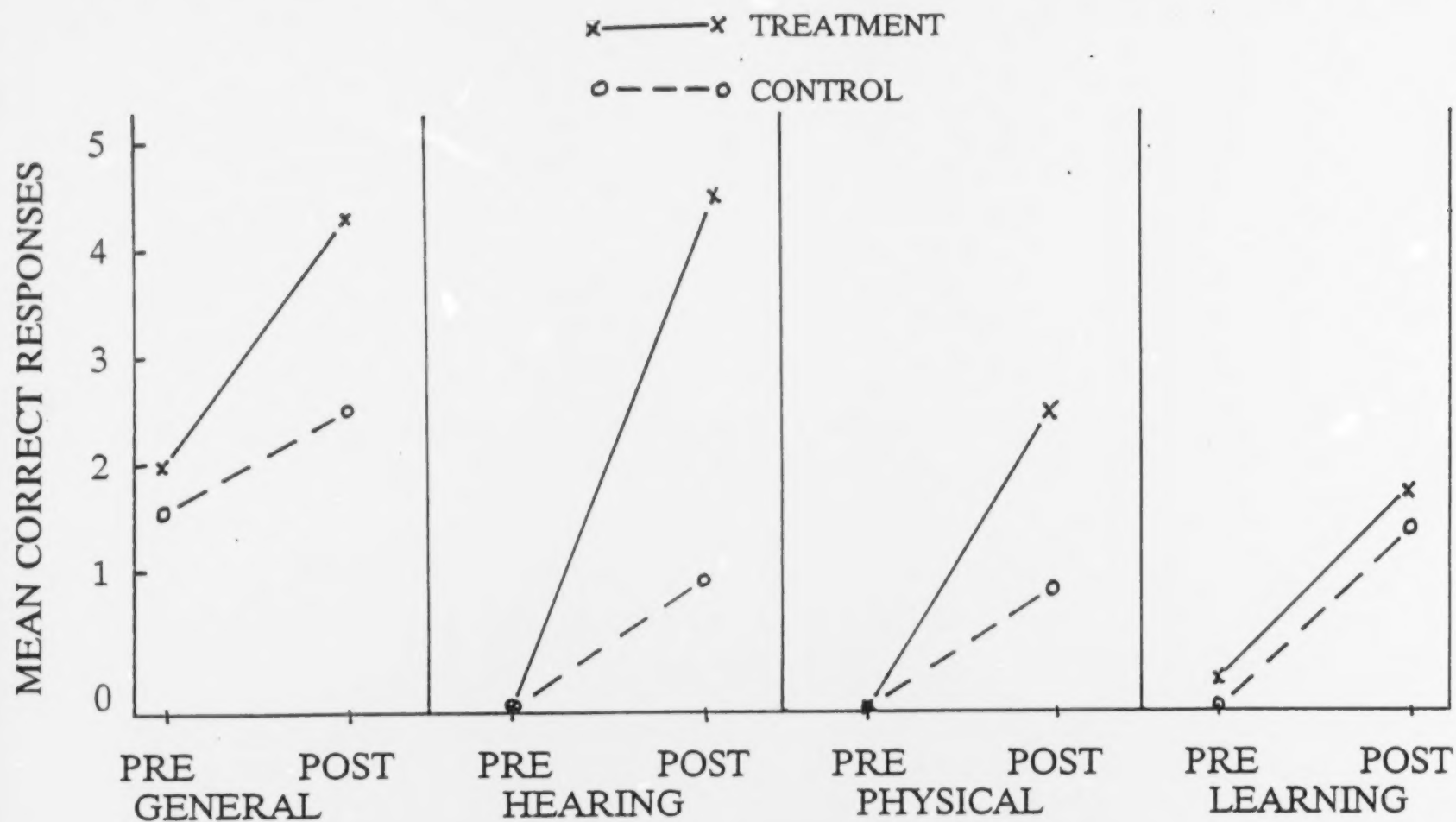


FIGURE 1. MEAN CORRECT RESPONSES FOR COGNITIVE CATEGORY

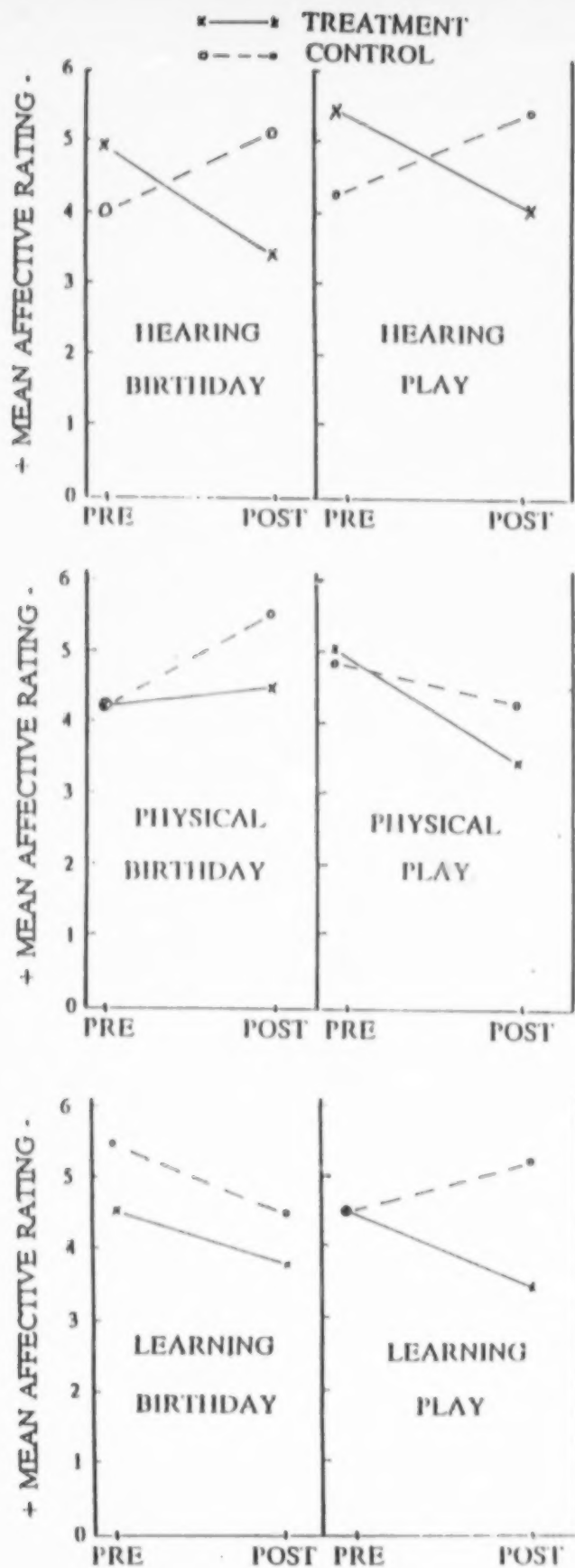


FIGURE 2. MEAN AFFECTIVE RATINGS